

## MODERN GREEK CUSTOMS.

## A WEDDING IN THE UPPER CIRCLES.

A MARRIAGE ceremony at Athens is a very different celebration from one in the country. In the former we find that there is exhibited somewhat of European civilization and cultivation; while the influence of foreign customs has not yet penetrated into the remote villages. There men are married, as well as baptized and buried, according to the good old traditionary forms of their ancestors. And yet there have been preserved, even in the city, so many characteristic peculiarities, that they appear novel and interesting to a stranger. I was, therefore, very much pleased to receive one day an invitation to the wedding of a young Greek couple, which was to take place a few evenings later.

The ceremony is generally performed in the house of the bridegroom, though in some provinces the parish church is resorted to. But in this respect, as in most others, each petty district has its own customs, as immutable as the laws of the Medes and Persians. We went at an early hour to the house of the evening's festivities. It was a mansion of the old style, all of stone and stucco, and faced one of the narrow streets that abound in the more ancient part of the town. A crowd of the lower classes, who, though they were not among the invited, made bold to collect in force about the door, seemed to preclude all entrance. A small company, some distance down the street, were keeping up their spirits with frequent potations; and made merry with the music of a stringed instrument, whose notes grated harshly on our ears. It was ever and anon interrupted by the jocose comments which the party uttered upon the appearance of the guests, as they successively came into the light cast by a flaming torch set in a convenient position. When we had succeeded in working our way up the thronged staircase, we found some sixty or eighty persons already congregated in the moderately large parlor, which, though it seemed rather bare of ornament and furniture to one who, like myself, had come from the West, had some pretensions in common with the drawing-rooms of Paris and London. The assembled company, composed, as usual, of a much greater proportion of ladies than gentlemen, were mostly dressed in the last style of Parisian fashions. Yet there was a sprinkling of gentlemen in the

genuine Albanian dress, comprising your free and easy people, who wish to pass for the most independent class of society, and scorn to adopt the continually changing *mode*. There were not wanting a considerable number of pretty faces among the ladies (who, according to the common practice, congregated on one side of the room); but it was a beauty consisting rather in freshness of colour, and a good healthy look, than in delicacy of feature. If, however, rumor tells true, some of the tints are borrowed; and the belle of the ball-room makes but a sorry figure the next morning. All the tight lacing in the world could not give an Athenian damsel the wasp-like contour of figure, which is the admiration of all your French dress-makers and misses in their teens. Disguise it as they may, there is a tendency to the *en bon point* among the ladies, many of whom waddle about with a grace which would have seemed charming in the eyes of our worthy Dutch progenitors. The men, on the other hand, are a lean, lank race, whose dark-complexioned faces acquire an additional touch of ferocity from the formidable moustaches they wear, and which, when their hands are not otherwise employed, they may be seen twirling by the hour.

The company were all assembled, and on the tiptoe of expectation, when the bridegroom and bride entered, and took their stand at the further extremity of the room. Each of them held a long lighted waxen taper, and the groomsman and bridesmaid carried similar ones. The bride, arrayed in a white satin dress, covered with lace, and having for a head-dress a wreath of flowers, from behind which a long white veil hung down over her shoulders, looked charming,—as what bride does not? She bore the classic name of Athená. The bridegroom was dressed in Frank costume.

The priests came in at the same time with the couple,—or, more properly, there were present at the commencement of the service two priests, with a deacon and a young man who read the responses, and corresponded to the *enfant de chœur* of the Latin Church.

There are two distinct services in the Greek Church pertaining to this ceremony; and the rite of marriage cannot take place, unless the parties have been previously betrothed. Sometimes, however, as in this instance, the one service takes place immediately before the other.

The liturgy was read by one of the priests from an elegantly bound service book. In one part of the ceremony he stopped, and, taking up a ring from the small table, on which were deposited the various utensils which the deacon had brought in, he thrice made the sign of the cross over the book. Then he touched it to the forehead of the bridegroom, and to that of the bride. Last of all he placed it successively upon the finger, first of one and then of the other, after divers crossings performed in the air.

When the parties were thus lawfully betrothed, there was a short pause, and then the bishop, whom the relatives had invited to officiate in order to give more brilliancy to the wedding, entered the room, and the priests hastened to do him homage. He is usually dressed in the ordinary episcopal costume, wearing his black cloak and gown, and the clerical cap, over which a black veil hangs down behind, as a distinguishing mark of his office. But on this occasion his head was covered with a crown, and he carried a heavy silver crozier, such as is only to be seen in the Greek Church—Roman Catholic bishops rarely appearing in public with it. The handsome dresses of the priests added to the singularity of the scene. The bishop now took the principal part in the services, reading from a book covered with a solid silver binding, which one of the priests held before him. Whenever he found it necessary to lay aside his crozier, one of the attendant ecclesiastics took it, at the same time kissing his superior's hand. And when he resumed it the same ceremony was repeated, to the no small disgust of those of us who were not accustomed to such abject servility. The service was a long one; and we became quite tired of it; for it consisted chiefly of prayers, which were hurried through, and of passages of Scripture mumbled in such a manner as to be quite unintelligible. Some portions of the written form are, in themselves, so utterly senseless, that no one has the least idea of what they mean.

The great and essential part of the rite was the *crowning* of the couple. The crowns were, in this case, merely wreaths of artificial flowers, numbers of which may be seen in the shops every day. The groomsmen held one over the head of the bridegroom, and the bridesmaid held a similar one over the bride's head, during the whole time; and they appeared quite weary before the conclusion of the ceremony was reached. At last, when the proper time came, the bishop took one of

the wreaths, and touching it to the forehead of the bridegroom, and afterwards to that of the bride, made with it the sign of the cross between the couple. This he thrice repeated, while at the same time, he recited the words which follow: "Thou, the servant of the Lord, Gregory, art crowned (or married) to the servant of the Lord, Athená, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." He then crowned the bridegroom with this wreath; and with the other performed the same ceremony with the bride. Later the groomsmen, who is usually the godfather, or *nonnos*, of the bridegroom, and is expected to be hereditary sponsor, exchanged the two wreaths, and then replaced them on the heads of the couple. A cup was then handed by the bishop, first to the man, and then to the woman; and each of them drank a portion of the wine it contained. This very pretty ceremony was symbolical of the obligation, which both parties enter into, to participate equally in all the pleasures and sufferings of life, in its joys and its sorrows. I had heard it stated that a bitter ingredient is mingled with the wine, typical of life's vicissitudes. But those of whom I inquired, assured me that nothing of the kind is customary. It was singular that, with so affecting an incident, there should be closely connected another of a ludicrous character. The bishop took the hand of the priest; he in turn grasped that of the deacon; and so, with the unmarried couple, the singers and all, a string was made, which the chief ecclesiastic led around the table in the centre of the room. The whole resembled in a ludicrous manner, some of those games which the children play in America.

With this the service came to an end, to the satisfaction of every one present. While the priests retired, all pressed around the bridegroom and bride to offer congratulations, some formal, and others affectionate. The company remained but a few moments more. A servant came bringing in a large tray, covered with candies: and each guest was expected to help himself plentifully to them, and to carry some home. A few seemed to measure their kind feelings to the couple, by the quantity which they heaped together. Judging by this criterion, their benevolent feelings were not small. One or two drew forth their handkerchiefs, and carried them away full. After which the company began to disperse, and I followed the general example.

It struck me as a very singular circumstance, that during the entire service which



I had been listening to, not a single response had been made by the couple, nor had the consent of the parties been expressed, or any promise exacted of them. In fact, the bridegroom may arrange the whole matter with the parents or guardians of the lady, without her knowledge, and even against her will. And let not any one suppose that such a thing, though sanctioned by law, never actually occurs in practice. We assure them that such things do happen, and not unfrequently either. A case of this kind was related to me, as having taken place not long since at Smyrna, which was so romantic in its details, that it might have formed the plot of a tale of no ordinary interest. A wealthy inhabitant of that city, an old Greek subject, had an only daughter, named Theodosia, whose hand had been sought, and whose affections had been gained by a respectable young English resident of the place. But the father was too proud to let his daughter marry a foreigner, and a heretic, too; and he commanded her to think no more of him. As an offset, he promised his daughter in marriage to a boorish Greek from the East. But, it is well known, the affections are sometimes most unreasonably stubborn; and the young lady preferred an elopement to remaining with her parents, under such circumstances. A rendezvous was fixed upon by the two lovers; but, unfortunately, there was a misunderstanding as to the spot, and Theodosia, after waiting for hours at the place agreed upon, was finally discovered and brought back to her father's house. Threats, and even chastisement, were employed, ineffectually, with the hope of gaining her consent. Notwithstanding this a day was appointed for the nuptials, the priests were called in to perform the rite, and the young girl was brought into the room by main force. While the service was being read Theodosia fainted, and the priests stopped until she recovered her senses, when they proceeded; and she was wedded to a man whom she loathed. These circumstances may appear the more remarkable, from the fact, that at this time the young lady was nineteen or twenty years of age. So inauspicious a marriage was not likely to prove a fortunate union. It was not long before the wife was forced to be separated from her husband, who had treated her in the most cruel manner. Her father became the strenuous advocate of this measure; but

for a long time, he found himself utterly unable to persuade her to leave the man whom he had compelled her to wed.\*

#### MARRIAGE AMONG THE LOWER ORDERS.

The customs which characterize any country are to be found in their purity, only in those remote portions, into which the manners of other lands have not as yet penetrated. The increasing facilities of intercommunication, while they ameliorate the condition of the poor, so far as mere material interests are affected, destroy in Greece, as well as in Switzerland, those striking contrasts in the mode of living, which excite the curiosity of the stranger. The American, walking the streets of Athens, hears at every turn the cry of the peddler, who, under the name of "*pania Americanica*," hawks the fabrics of the Lowell mills; and the Grecian mother finds it cheaper to clothe her daughters in them, than to occupy her leisure hours at the loom.

In the secluded villages, the ceremony of marriage, which in the capital has become gradually assimilated more and more to the stereotyped form of other countries, includes a number of ancient customs. Every petty hamlet, or, at least, every small district, possesses some of its own, which entirely regulate the performance of the ceremony, and which none of even the more polished citizens attempt to abrogate. It would, therefore, be quite a hopeless task to describe *all* the different modes; and the customs prevailing in the province of Maina, at the southerly extremity of the country, may be taken as a fair specimen of the rest. The wedding has long since been projected, and after having been fully discussed in family council, on either side, the connection has been approved, and the time for its consummation determined by all the nearest relatives of the interested parties. For such a thing as a clandestine marriage, or one celebrated without the authorization of friends, is almost unheard of. Whoever should marry a young lady, without first asking the consent of even her third cousins, would, in Maina, inevitably draw upon himself their fiercest animosity; and cause an irremediable breach, which would sooner or later end in revenge and bloodshed. We have even heard mentioned the instance of a young man, who eloped with a girl of his acquaintance, and who after forty years had passed, and he

\* This is the story, as related by one who had been a neighbor and acquaintance of the parties; and it was confirmed by some esteemed Athenian friends.

was surrounded by grown-up sons and daughters, fell a victim to the unrelenting hatred of those whom he had so long since offended.\*

The first preparations commence a week beforehand, and as the ceremony occurs on Sunday, these take place on the same day of the week. The bridegroom and his intended father-in-law each invite their friends to their houses. If they live in the same village, this is accomplished in person; but if they live too far off for that, the invitation is equally well understood, on the reception of a small cake, which in these regions takes the place of the gilt and crested envelope, and the "At home," card of our more refined countries. Upon its reception, every one is in duty bound to go the same day to the house to which he is bidden, where a convivial party is thus assembled. Their occupation for the afternoon consists in cleansing, and sometimes grinding, the wheat, though this latter operation is often deferred for a day or two. While performing these offices of friendship, the company enliven their labors by singing various songs, for the most part curious and characteristic; few of which have ever yet been collected in a permanent form.

The remainder of the week is spent in a quiet manner, and it is not until the ensuing Saturday, that the same parties reassemble at the house of bridegroom or bride, as the case may be: for no one is invited to both places. The bridegroom, who, according to the custom of the district, bears all the expenses, has previously agreed to provide a stipulated number of rams or sheep, which are never less than three, and rarely exceed a dozen. These he now sends to the house of his intended father-in-law, and with them, three times as many loaves as there are sheep, and three times as many *okes* of wine\* as there are loaves of bread. The men who are dispatched with these gifts—which are intended for immediate consumption, are expected to be entertained and lodged at the house of the bride, for the night. Such an addition to the household might, indeed, disturb an American housekeeper. But as beds are an unknown, or unusual commodity, as far as the greater part of the population are concerned, even a large number of guests can easily be admitted. Provided the Greek peasant finds plenty to eat, and especially to drink, he lays himself down in perfect contentment,

wrapped up, as he is, in a huge *capote*, or shaggy coat, by the side of the fire, kindled on a stone hearth, in the middle of the room. Meanwhile the family occupy, perhaps, a small inclosed space at one of the ends of the house, to which access is gained by a ladder of two or three steps. I am alluding here, of course, only to the habitations of the lower and poorer class, which occasion may, perhaps be taken at a future time, to describe more fully. Even in retired districts, one occasionally finds a house with much greater pretensions to comfortable arrangement.

About midnight, another set of men are dispatched from the bridegroom's house. They carry a complete attire for the bride, who is dressed up in it immediately. Then, on Sunday morning, at about three or four o'clock, the bridegroom proceeds thither in person, accompanied by a few of his more intimate friends. And now the marriage ceremony, that is the *stephanoma*, or crowning, takes place in the presence of all. The parish priest, who has been called to quit his slumbers at this early hour, officiates. Upon the conclusion of the service, the priest retires to his home, and so does the bridegroom, leaving his lady behind at her father's house. But at perhaps nine o'clock, in broad daylight, he proceeds on horseback, and attended by all his friends, to claim and carry home his newly married wife. By his side walk two of his nearest female relatives, on his father's and mother's side. When the procession reaches the house, the bridegroom must not enter, but must stop in some part of the court, where the guests of the bride's father come each to greet him. First, his mother-in-law embraces him, at the same time placing about his neck a silk handkerchief, as a gift. All the women follow her example, and place a like present on his shoulders; so that, before they get through, he will find himself loaded with a pile of handkerchiefs. These, of course, he does not wish to keep, and within a few days disposes of them, without compunction, by sale. As the custom is universal in the region, it becomes merely a matter of exchange, for every one receives in the end about as much as he gives. And now the bridegroom and his friends may enter the house, where they are generously entertained, and conviviality reigns awhile.

But now this must end. The father takes his daughter, and committing her to

\* This story is embodied in one of those pathetic *marologia*, or laments, which are repeated over the tombs of the deceased. In this poetic history, the leading events of the man's life are related in considerable detail. Many persons have acquired a singular reputation for their skill in composing them.

† Wine and oil are in Greece measured by weight, and an *oke* is nearly equal to three of our pounds.



her husband's care, gives him such advice and exhortation as he thinks proper. Then leading them both into the court, he makes them tread on some firm stone; which form, if it has any meaning at all, (as, with regard to many of the more trifling particulars of such ceremonies as these, seems rather improbable), is intended to convey the idea of the unanimity necessary to both parties. The parents now take leave of their daughter, and the friends accompany the newly married couple to their home. The guests of the bridegroom divert themselves as they go, by singing songs, possessing, in truth, little poetical merit, but lively enough; in which they represent themselves as having "robbed a village, and despoiled a country, to carry off the bride, whose praises thousands sing." This nettles the friends of the bride's father, who retort upon them by wishing, "May the bride shine upon you like the moon, and illuminate you as the sun. May she trample you under foot like the earth; and be in no way dependent upon you for aught."

The ceremony which took place at the father's, is now repeated at that of the bridegroom; and the bride is not permitted to enter her new home, before her husband's friends have all pressed around her to shower presents upon her, consisting of various little commodities, or of money. All the assembled company follow the couple into the house, and after a few unimportant forms, they sit down to a collation, with which the entire ceremonial comes to an end.

Those who are acquainted with the customs of the ancient Greeks and Romans, will scarcely fail to observe the very striking points of resemblance which those I have been relating present. The wedding, the bridal procession, the songs of the friends, and many of the inferior details, preserve a similarity truly wonderful, when the varied circumstances, and the long intervening space of time, are taken into consideration. The fact must, however, be borne in mind, that the habits of the people in various districts are so extremely diverse, that the description of those which prevail in one place, by no means conveys a correct idea of those of a village only a few miles distant.

#### A GREEK BAPTISM.

One of the tenants of a friend intended to have his child baptized; and we were included among those who were requested to witness the ceremony. The small cottage, which stood with its end to the

street, was entered from the court on its side. Here a part of the family, in their gala dresses, were awaiting the arrival of the priest who was to officiate. There is a large fund of kindness in the Grecian heart, even among the poorest; and the inmates of the cottage received us with pleasure, and exerted themselves to the utmost to entertain us. The priest kept us waiting for him. When he did come, I found that he was an acquaintance, and officiated in the neighboring church of St. Nicholas Rangaves; whose shrill little bell, ringing to call the people to their devotions, used to break in upon my morning slumbers. A good heart beats within that coarse black gown, and a ruddy face beams with good nature from under the priestly cap; but a plentiful use of the snuff-box does not improve his appearance for cleanliness.

A large brass vessel, a couple of feet in diameter, was brought in by a young man, and placed in the centre of the room. Several bucketsful of warm and cold water were poured in, until the temperature was judged suitable. But before the water was fit for using, another operation was necessary; for the presence of any evil spirits or magic in the water would infallibly impair, if not destroy, the effect of the ordinance. If any such beings or influence lay concealed, they were assuredly dispelled by the manipulations of the priest, who, baring his arm, three times drew it through the water, making the sign of the cross. And if this had been ineffectual, they could not remain after that he had blown upon the surface, so as to repeat the same sacred sign upon it. The water being thus consecrated, the child was brought in, neatly dressed in white, and presented by its godfather for baptism. And now it was stripped of every particle of clothing, then taken by the priest, who held it up before the whole company, in order, I presume, that all might be witnesses to the act. A small bottle of oil was presented to the ecclesiastic, and after its contents had been sanctified by receiving an apostolic benediction, the infant's entire body was anointed with it. This is not, however, considered an integral part of the religious rite; but is merely intended to prevent any injurious effects from the application of water at so tender an age, as is customary among the Greeks. And the precaution, if it be of any avail, is certainly needed. The common people consider the performance of the ceremony almost, if not quite, a *sine qua non* of salvation, believing in its regenerating influence. So

the more delicate the babe's constitution, the more anxious are the parents to have the rite performed as early as possible. Notwithstanding all their precautions, however, I have heard that great numbers of infants yearly die in consequence of the shock they receive.

The act of baptism itself consisted in three times entirely immersing the child. The priest managed this very adroitly, and prevented its strangling by covering its mouth and whole face with one of his hands. After this was done (the name being given at the same time), the priest returned the crying and shivering baby into the hands of the godfather, and the others who stood near, by whom he was speedily wiped and clothed. The baptism was completed by the application to the child's forehead, ears, hands, and feet, of a little of the "holy unguent," which is, or was until lately, compounded only by the Patriarch of Constantinople, and dispensed once a year to all the churches.

The infant being now removed, the godfather presented to each of the persons present a bright silver coin of the date of the current year, and a ribbon passed through a small hole in it. The person who receives this little piece of money is bound to keep it safely, that it may remind him of his having witnessed the baptism of that child. This testimony he is expected to render, if necessary, before men, and also before the angels at the last Judgment. And now the glittering coin, as it lies glittering on the table before me as I write this, with the neat knot of blue ribbon tied to it, recalls the image of that departed innocent, which no longer needs any to witness to its christening here below.

The godfather bore all the contingent expenses, which were in this case but small, though they sometimes amount to a considerable sum. So it is esteemed quite a mark of friendship to stand as sponsor for your neighbor's child. But the most important consideration by far, is that the connection thus formed is as binding as a natural relationship, and for ever precludes all intermarriages between those thus allied to each other, even to the same degree as with members of the same stock—that is, according to Greek law, to the ninth degree, I believe.

#### FUNERAL PROCESSIONS, AND OFFERINGS TO THE DEAD.

Look with me for a moment at the procession, which is this moment passing on its way to the cemetery beyond the Ilissus.

During the hot months, several such may be counted every day. The melancholy nasal chant of the priests as they come along, betokens the approach of the train; and, as it comes nearer and nearer, the litanies which are recited become more distinguishable. The corpse of the deceased is borne in a light wooden box or coffin, upon the shoulders of men. The body, decorated with flowers and clothed in white, is exposed to the gaze of all; for the lid has been removed, and is carried by a man or boy in the van of the procession. It has a large cross invariably painted upon it. As it approaches, every bystander reverently raises his hat, and stands uncovered until it has passed; but this mark of respect is paid not to the departed, but to the sign of the cross, as my Greek friends assure me. It must be confessed, there is something rather repulsive in this parading of death through the thronged street, especially where its subject has been chosen from among the aged, or bears the marks of great and recent struggles for dear life. Such is the manner in which the common people are carried to their last resting-place; but the death of a bishop occasions much greater pomp. He is carried through the most public thoroughfares; and, dressed as in the discharge of his ecclesiastical functions, he is placed in a sitting posture upon the bier. Upon reaching the monastery where he is privileged to enter, he is buried in the same position,—a distinction allowed to no one else.

The interest entertained by survivors for the memory and souls of the dead, is evinced by the prayers that are said in their behalf, though the Greeks do not profess to believe in the existence of a purgatory. A singular practice calls up their remembrance yet more vividly. Several successive Fridays are set apart as especially devoted to the dead. The bell of the church of St. Nicolas, situated at the very base of the Acropolis, attracted my attention on one of these occasions. Upon entering the church, which was a small edifice scarcely exceeding in size an ordinary room, I found a few persons waiting for the commencement of the services, the men and boys, as usual, standing near the altar, while the women kept at a more respectful distance. Ever and anon some person would come in carrying a small dish covered with a napkin; and after devoutly crossing himself place the dish upon the floor, in front of the screen of the *hieron* or holy place. These plates contain a peculiar sort of compound or cake, which is called the

*Collyva*. It is, in fact, an offering made to the "manes" of the dead, and can certainly claim a pagan, rather than a Christian origin. It is carefully made, the principal ingredients being boiled wheat and currants. The surface of the top is ornamented with various degrees of neatness, by means of the eatable red grains of the pomegranate, almonds, or any thing of that kind. These cakes were sent by the relatives of those who had died within a year or two; and if handsome, were allowed to remain before the chancel. If more commonly prepared, the contents was thrown into a basket. In every plate of *Collyva*, and in every basket were stuck a number of little lighted waxen tapers, which burned during the service time.

The notion of the common people was expressed to me by a person whom I

asked to explain the purport of the ceremony. "The soul of the deceased," said he, "for whom the *Collyva* is offered, comes down from heaven during the service, and eats a single grain of the wheat." But what manner of good this could do the disembodied spirit, he could not inform me; nor did he give any satisfactory reason for offering so large a quantity, when the spirit is so moderate in its desires. The parish priest, during the short prescribed forms took notice of the names of all those for whom *Collyva* had been offered. At the conclusion, he helped himself to his share of the cakes, after that the spirits had enjoyed an ample opportunity of eating to their hearts' content. The rest was distributed by the handful to every one present, to be carried away and eaten at home,—a feast for the dead.

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